



Reviewed work:

Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice. (2009). William Grabe. New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 467 + xv. ISBN 9780521729741. \$39.00

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A quick search of the internet for books related to teaching reading in a second language will provide an interested party with 20 or more titles published within the last 3–4 years and seemingly countless older texts. Any number of these texts will almost certainly be useful in various ways to different scholars. Despite this abundance of useful texts on the subject however, *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice* by William Grabe is likely to become one of the more important texts in the already crowded field. In this impressive text, Grabe covers an extensive range of topics in a manner that is informative and for the most part clear, without being overly simplified. Despite a few minor issues, which are discussed below, this most recent work from Grabe has much to offer teachers, planners, researchers, and students of reading on many different levels.

The first of the four parts of the book (Chapters 1–5) looks at cognitive factors that affect reading comprehension, starting with lower level cognitive factors. By beginning with these cognitive fundamentals of how reading comprehension occurs, Grabe establishes, very early on, his position that at the most basic levels, first language (L1) reading and second language (L2) reading consist of the same complex mental components and processes. As an example of the complexity that Grabe outlines in the reading process, the lower level processes looked at here are ‘word recognition,’ ‘syntactic parsing,’ and ‘semantic-proposition encoding’ (p. 22). The first of these, ‘word recognition,’ is also further divided into ‘orthographic processing,’ ‘phonologic

processing,’ ‘semantic and syntactic processing,’ ‘lexical access,’ and ‘morphological processing’ (pp. 23–26). In order for reading comprehension to occur, these processes and many more, all described with impressive and comprehensive support from the research, must be combined or used at different times while reading.

In Chapter 3, Grabe examines the role of higher-level mental processes such as consciously focusing attention on the reading task and how the higher and lower cognitive processing levels interact for reading comprehension to occur. Chapter 4 details how the processes discussed in the chapters 2 and 3 interact with more general cognitive dimensions such as ‘attention, noticing, and consciousness,’ ‘inferencing,’ and ‘context’ in helping to build reading comprehension (p. 59). Perhaps most importantly, Grabe shows how fluency and automaticity develop mostly from implicit learning (p. 59). This is an indication of why he stresses repeatedly throughout the text that exposure to written material as in extensive reading programs is so important. Section I concludes in Chapter 5 with an explanation of how the underlying processes discussed in Chapters 2–4 can be combined in a way that allows reading to be seen as a coherent process. The chapter also provides an overview of the many models that have been proposed in the literature in an attempt to provide a coherent picture of this very complex process.

The second part of the book (Chapters 6–9) looks at patterns of how the development of reading skills and processes might be affected in different language learners. Grabe examines such claims that topics as how languages differ in skills required to read well (Chapter 6). For example, he claims readers of Chinese characters place greater emphasis on visual processing, while in reading Hebrew readers focus on processing consonant sounds (pp. 111–114). Different languages, he explains, have different levels of orthographic depth and the native speakers of different languages are likely to benefit differently from teaching the letter-to-sound correspondence in English (pp. 114–117). Chapter 7 looks at the many relationships between first and second language reading. The differences examined here include linguistic processing differences and developmental differences while the hypotheses pertaining to how the development of reading skills can be related or connected include ‘developmental interdependence hypothesis’ and the ‘the language threshold hypothesis.’

In Chapter 8, Grabe explains that social factors influence students’ development in reading in both first and second languages (pp. 152–153). Despite the importance of various social factors, Grabe explains they are seldom discussed in applied linguistics contexts, yet they are clearly important in the progress of students in all areas of L2 learning. As a result, social factors require more attention in any complete text on reading development (p. 153). He provides this attention by discussing issues such as socioeconomic status (pp. 157–159), family and home issues (p. 159–162), and ‘language-minority identity’ (pp. 166–167).

In Chapter 9, Grabe deftly handles the complex issue of motivation in the reading classroom. Though this topic could certainly comprise a book in itself, Grabe briefly describes the relevant theories of motivation (pp. 176–181) before going on to explain motivation in both L1 and L2 reading classrooms. As always throughout this book, he synthesizes a great variety of the research available on this complex topic and looks at how the research from both L1 and L2 reading can broaden understanding of the two forms of reading instruction and learning.

In Part III (Chapters 10–13), Grabe examines in detail the major components of reading used to build comprehension during the process of reading. The components examined include ‘syntactic knowledge and processing,’ ‘strategies that support comprehension,’ ‘integration of strategies and higher-level processing,’ ‘discourse structure awareness’ and how vocabulary knowledge affects reading comprehension. Grabe stresses that the processes discussed in this section are more directly open to teaching than many of the other processes that were looked at previously, particularly in Part I of the text. Many of those processes, such as ‘goal setting’ or ‘inferencing,’ are not solely related to reading while others, such as word-recognition efficiency (p. 195), only influence reading comprehension at certain stages in the reading process. In Chapter 10, Grabe looks at how the reader builds main-idea comprehension using grammatical knowledge and comprehension strategies while the following chapters (11–13) examine strategic reading development, discourse awareness, and vocabulary knowledge (p. 198).

In Part IV (Chapters 14–18), Grabe looks at topics related to the further building or expanding of reading comprehension skills. Grabe covers different topics in the first four chapters of this section: reading fluency, rate and comprehension are discussed in Chapter 14; extensive reading in Chapter 15; curriculum and instruction in Chapter 16; and assessment in Chapter 17. Chapter 18 looks at important issues that Grabe feels are outside the scope of this book but are nonetheless topics which merit mention and, he hopes, more attention in the research. The topics discussed in this important chapter include the relationship between reading and writing, and the effects of new technology and media, including television, on reading and others (pp. 376–377).

From the brief summary above, it can be seen that the broad range of issues covered and how this range of topics is organized are two of the features that will be attractive to many readers of this book. Although the content is divided into various sections and chapters, there does appear to be some repetition of topics and points which can be a little confusing at times. The division of the book into the four sections is useful, however, despite the complexity of some of the content. It allows readers to approach the book for their own specific purposes in learning more about the various aspects of reading rather than reading the whole text which can be somewhat challenging at times.

The research that Grabe builds on in this text is one of its strengths, although in some ways it may also be one of the complaints that some readers have. The sheer number of citations and references is a tribute both to Grabe for assembling the list and painstakingly citing sources and to the researchers themselves who have made so many advances in the understanding of this important field. Drawing on such a substantial research base also gives the reader a sense of confidence in the conclusions reached by the author. At the same time however, the fact that much of the research discussed in the text comes from L1 reading research could be off-putting for some readers who may feel that the difference between first and second language reading is substantial enough that care must be taken when using research from one field in discussions of the other (Hudson, 2007). Grabe, perhaps in anticipation of this criticism, states that the target of this book is to increase understanding of reading and reading development and to consider how the understanding of these points can be applied to second language learners. This challenge, he writes, cannot be accomplished simply by “... synthesizing L2 reading research, by itself ...” (Grabe, p. xiii).

As with other volumes that purportedly cover both reading theory and practice, some readers might feel that it is the practice section of the text that is the least developed of the two (Hudson, 2007; Ollerhead, 2008). Despite the fact that the suggestions for teaching discussed in this text are fairly general, they are present throughout the book, although the title *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from theory to practice* may mislead some readers to expect more direct advice. Grabe takes steps to respond to this possible criticism when he states in the introduction that this text does not provide guidance for the day-to-day teaching of reading. Instead, he argues, it is intended more to provide background knowledge and understanding of how reading develops than as guidance for practicing teachers (p. *xiii*). This being said, in each chapter, and particularly in the rather more in-depth discussion in the last two sections (Chapters 10–18), Grabe provides comments about how the research and theory covered in the prior discussion can be put to use in the classroom. Though this advice is more theoretical rather than for actual daily use in the classroom, it provides a bridge between the research theory and the classroom. An educator looking for activities will be disappointed. However, a teacher looking for support for the targeting of certain abilities or for the use of certain methods, such as extensive reading—that may be met with some resistance due to costs or other issues—will certainly find coherent, comprehensible support.

Overall, *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice* is a welcome addition to the already crowded field of reading and reading research. In this substantive and comprehensive text, Grabe presents a comprehensive account of where the understanding of the reading process stands and how that knowledge can be used to develop more successful teaching of reading in a second language. The range of topics covered is impressive, as is the depth at which they are discussed, and the book is also written in a style that is not overly directed only at those well versed in the field. Though not without some limitations, this book will undoubtedly be seen as an important text for researchers, planners, students, and teachers connected with teaching reading in an L2.

References

- Hudson, T. (2007). *Teaching reading in a second language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ollerhead, S. (2008). [Review of the book *Teaching reading in a second language* by T. Hudson]. *Reading in a foreign language*, 20, 273–277.

About the Reviewer

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